

# **Why the under-representation of the working class in Belgian Parliament could be problematic**

**Bram Wauters**

University College Ghent and Ghent University

[Bram.wauters@hogent.be](mailto:Bram.wauters@hogent.be)

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Politicologenetmaal 2011, Amsterdam

Session 11: Revisiting Representation: Old Concepts and New Challenges

## 1. Introduction

Politicians and political scientists from across the globe devote increasing attention to the socio-demographic representativeness of political institutions. The under-representation of specific groups in political institutions is considered to be a democratic problem of justice, legitimacy, responsiveness and effectiveness (Phillips 1995). Research on the political representation of socially disadvantaged groups has in recent years strongly focused on women and ethnic minorities (e.g. Rule and Zimmerman 1994; Anwar 2001; Dahlerup 2007; Togeby 2008).

The focus on these new societal groups has put social class as main unit of analysis out of sight. Social class continues, however, to be relevant for political representation. Anne Phillips (1995: 178) wrote: *“The exclusion of working-class perspectives seems just as problematic for contemporary democracy as the exclusion of women or ethnic minorities – and, indeed, goes a long way towards explaining current dissatisfaction with the political process”*. And also Manza and Brooks (2008: 201) contend: *“Political institutions often favour some classes over other”*.

Working class people are clearly underrepresented in the Belgian House of Representatives and on candidate lists for these elections, as we will demonstrate in the third section of this paper. On top of that, a decreasing share of working class candidates and parliamentarians can be noted in social democratic parties. Owing to evolutions on the side of these parties who are due to the catch-all process no longer exclusively focused on the working class, and to evolutions on the part of the working class, who vote in decreasing numbers for social-democratic parties, the self-evident link between workers and social-democratic parties has gradually disappeared.

Inspired by the analysis of Bovens & Wille (2010) on the lower-educated in Dutch politics, it is our aim to indicate whether the underrepresentation of the working class in Belgium is problematic and what the consequences could be of this underrepresentation. Descriptive underrepresentation can pose problems for the consideration of interests (substantive representation) and also for the levels of trust in the institutions in which a group is underrepresented, and more broadly for representative democracy in general. Therefore, we will analyse the opinions of working class people on a large number of political issues, their levels of political trust and their opinion about how they would like to be represented. We will confront

these results with results of the population at large. For this analysis, we rely upon the Partirep voter survey conducted at the 2009 regional elections in Flanders and Wallonia.

Before discussing the methodology and the empirical results, we will first situate the concept of social class and describe the presence of working class parliamentarians in the Belgian House of Representatives.

## **2. Social class as a contested concept**

The concept of social class will first be briefly explained.

Social stratification refers to the division of a society into several social layers with a clear hierarchy between them. The system of social stratification stands for the complex of social institutions that creates and maintains inequalities of different types (amongst others on the social and political level). It is built upon goods and characteristics that are highly valued in a particular society in a particular era (Grusky and Ku 2008). Research has revealed that in contemporary industrial societies, professional occupation can serve as an integrative indicator for the position in the social stratification system (Parkin 1971; Grusky and Ku 2008). Many of the goods, rewards and instruments that are relevant for one's social position can be directly (salary, etc.) or indirectly (prestige, status, etc.) related to this variable. Groups classified according to this variable are named 'social classes'. Individuals who are confronted with comparable socio-economic conditions share a position in the system of social stratification. The potential and limits of their behaviour and life chances are, due to their socio-economic position, similar. The impact is enormous: it affects, among other things, the housing situation, voting behaviour (Van der Waal et al. 2007), health situation, education (Lareau 2003), cultural tastes and participation (Bourdieu 1984), and even eating habits (Scholliers 1997). Grusky (1994: 19) concludes: "One would be hard-pressed to identify any aspect of human experience that sociologists have not linked to class-based variables in some way." It might be clear by now that the impact of social class reaches further than the economic sphere; it encompasses all aspects of human life.

But class has become a contested concept in modern society. There has been a fierce discussion since the 1950s about the relevance of class in post-industrial society. It is stated that owing to a democratisation of society and to an increase in education, class differences have lost much of

their sharpness. In this view, identity is no longer dominated by class, which only has relevance in historical perspective (Nisbet 1959; Clark and Lipset 1991; Pakulski and Waters 1996). A related discussion focuses on the development into the direction of a meritocratic society characterised by social fluidity where class background does not have an impact (or only a very limited one) upon life chances.

Evidence for this evolution has been mixed: some longitudinal studies show that class origin has a lower impact than before, while other studies indicate that nothing has changed in this respect (Breen & Goldthorpe 2001 ; Breen 2004 ; Goldthorpe & Jackson 2008). It seems from these studies that class still has at least some impact.

Another opinion in recent class literature posits that people have multiple identities with no fixed hierarchy (Klandermans 2001). Since class is too diffuse and too broad a category for the development of a class identity, additional sources of identification, such as living in a working-class neighbourhood or working in the same company, are important (Strangleman 2001; MacKenzie et al. 2006). Additional identifiers have always been important in the past but some traditional additional sources of information (urban area, etc.) about class tend to be no longer as effective as they used to be. Such additional identities could serve as mechanisms through which class-based thinking and class-based identity are articulated. Identification with for instance the smaller occupational community functions in this view as a useful stepping-stone for identification with the broader social class. Class is in this view still relevant as it is supported by smaller identifications.

The current relevance of class and of class identity is confirmed by a study revealing that 89 per cent of employees estimate that a working class still exists in Belgium (De Weerd and De Witte 2004). The same study shows that more than 56 per cent of the respondents identify themselves with a particular social class.

This paper deals with the political representation of social classes, and of the working class in particular. Manza & Brooks (2008) identify three factors that could explain why class is linked to political behaviour: common economic interests, group consciousness (viewing themselves as member of a common group) and social networks such as neighbourhoods and occupational

groups disseminating new ideas and/or reinforcing existing predispositions. Individuals who are confronted with comparable socio-economic conditions share a common position in the system of social stratification, have similar economic and other interests, have a certain group feeling and are socialized and supported by their environment to further the interests of this group. Therefore, it seems to relevant to study the political representation of the working class.

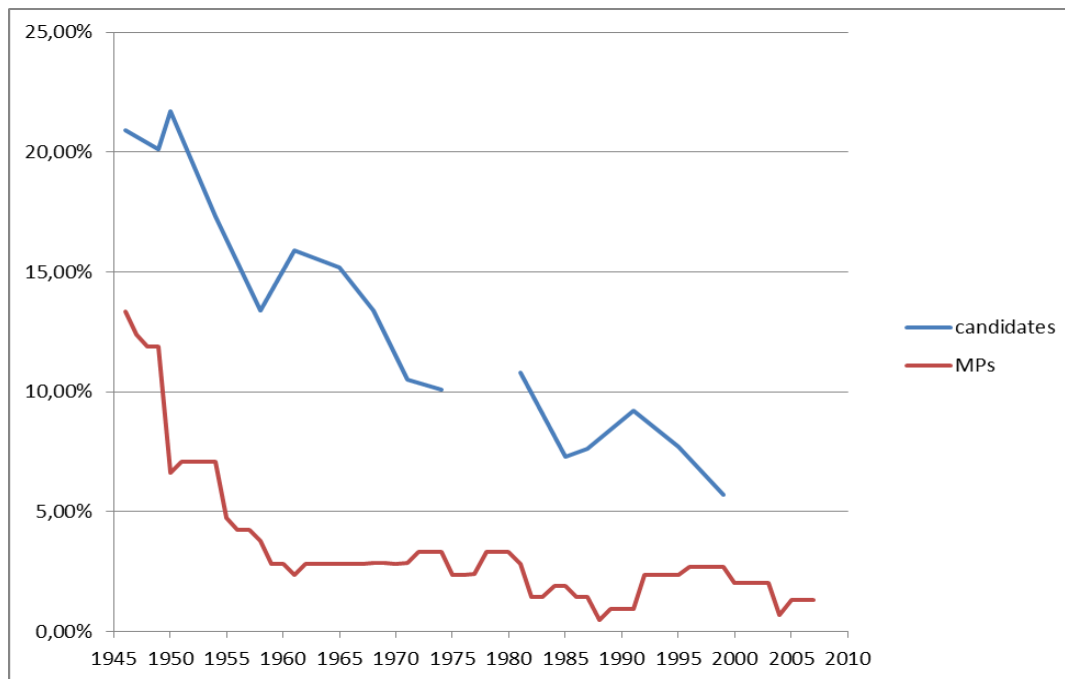
### **3. The underrepresentation of blue collar workers in Belgian Parliament**

We will now demonstrate that working class people are underrepresented in the Belgian House of Representatives, and that the partisan affiliation of their representatives has changed over time. Figure 1 shows a marked decrease in the percentage of MPs with a blue collar background over time. Whereas immediately after the war these percentages were around 12 %, they had fallen down to around 2% (and lower) from the 1960s onwards.<sup>1</sup> This evolution corresponds to a trend in other European countries (Cotta & Verzichelli, 2007). The percentages of workers in the House remain surprisingly constant (at a low level however) from the 1960s onwards. Figure 1 also exhibits the same downward trend for candidates. The share of blue collar workers on candidate lists has always been higher than their share in the House of Representatives. This could be explained by the fact that being a candidate encompasses a more limited involvement than being a member of Parliament. The general trend of professionalization has had a more limited effect on candidate lists, and consequently there has been more room for working class people.

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<sup>1</sup> We should note that the share of blue collar workers in society has also decreased considerably in the decades after WWII. In 1947, the national census counted 51,5 % blue collar workers in the working population. In 2007, this percentage has decreased to 27,58 % (own calculations based on data of the Social Security Services and the National Bank of Belgium). However, the percentages of blue collar workers in parliament and on candidate lists are (and have always been) far below their percentages in the population.

Figure 1: Percentage of blue-collar workers (EseC-categories 7, 8 en 9)<sup>2</sup> in the Belgian House of Representatives and on candidate lists for elections for the House of Representatives, 1946-2007<sup>3</sup> (Wauters, forthcoming)



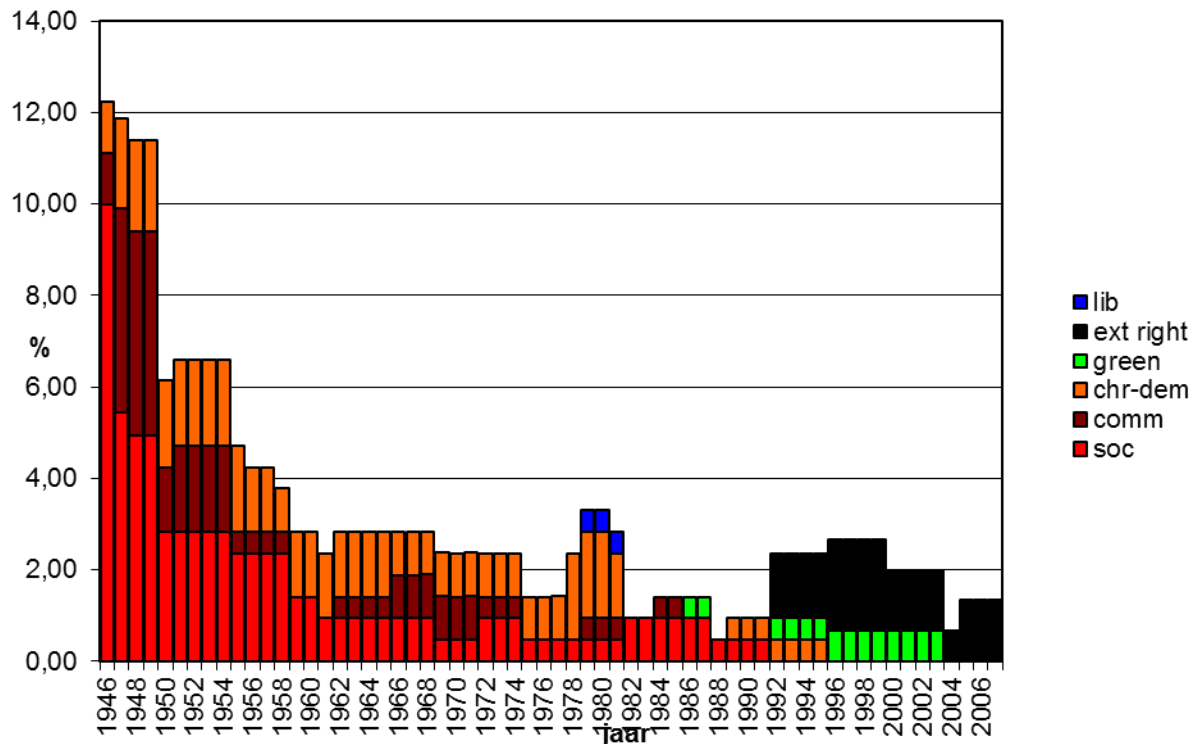
In Figure 2 we turn our attention to the partisan affiliation of the working class politicians. It appears from this figure that the catch-all thesis for social-democratic parties not only applies to their party platforms and election manifestos, but also to their political personnel. Social-democratic parties (and to a lesser extent communist parties) have longtime taken the lion share of the number of blue workers in the House. This share has gradually declined together with the general declining share of workers in Parliament. From the beginning of the 1990s onwards, two remarkable phenomena took place: there were no longer blue collar workers in the social-democratic parliamentary parties, and they started to appear on the benches of extreme right parties. It appears that the party profile of parliamentarians from the working class has followed the changed composition of the parties' electorate. Besides the correspondence with the electorate, the lower degree of professionalization could serve as an additional explanation.

<sup>2</sup> MPs are classified on the basis of their previous occupations. We use the European Socio-economic Classification (ESeC) scheme which has been designed for the operationalisation of social class across Europe (for more information, see: Harrison and Rose 2006; Wauters, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Candidate data for the 1977 and 1978 general elections are missing.

Extreme right parties often have difficulties in finding suitable candidates and as consequence, the process of professionalization has probably not gone as far as in other parties. The same trend can be found among candidates (not in figure 2) (Wauters, forthcoming).

Figure 2: Percentage of blue-collar workers (EseC-categories 7, 8 en 9) in the Belgian House of Representatives by party family, 1946-2007 (Wauters, forthcoming)



#### 4. Research questions and methodology

These findings could have potentially far-reaching consequences. Based on the literature, we expect effects on two aspects. Firstly, the division between descriptive representation (being present in parliament) and substantive representation (the raising of one's interests in parliament) is less sharp than often suggested. In general, one would expect that the role orientations and background characteristics of MPs correlate (Celis 2006; Owens 2005). By having experience with similar problems and phenomena and by having suffered from a common disadvantaged structural position, people are more likely to devote attention to the issues of their social group, according to the theory of the 'politics of presence' (Phillips 1995). A low number of descriptive

representatives could imply a low level of substantive representation, which could be problematic especially if opinions of the underrepresented group differ from mainstream views. Secondly, descriptive representation is symbolically important. Because descriptive representatives of subordinate social groups are likely to be affected themselves by the legislation they help to pass, their presence in parliament could be seen as a guarantee for the consideration of the interests of that social group (Williams 1998). In that sense, an enhancement in descriptive representation has the potential to increase political trust among social groups (Pantoja and Segura 2003) and to create a sense of belonging.

It will be investigated in this paper whether these two elements apply to the working class in Belgium. In a first phase, we will look at the policy positions of working class people and see to what extent they differ from people from other social classes. If these differences are outspoken, the descriptive under-representation of the working class in parliament risks to lead to an under-representation on the substantive level, as their specific interests tend to be overlooked. Secondly, we will analyse whether political trust is lower among working-class people: does their under-representation in political institutions lead to a lower level of connection with and trust in these institutions, and does this incite working-class people to prefer other modes of representation?

For our analysis, we rely on data of the PartiRep voter survey. This voter survey was conducted in the two largest Belgian regions – Flanders and Wallonia – on the occasion of the 2009 Regional Elections. The PartiRep Election Study relies on a geographically stratified sample of Flemish and Walloon citizens eligible to vote drawn from the national registry. The survey has a panel design organized in three waves: three months before, in the last two weeks before and two weeks after Election Day. In the first wave, structured face-to-face interviews (CAPI) of approximately 45 minutes were conducted with 2,331 respondents. They were contacted again for two short follow-up telephone interviews (CATI), leading to 1,845 (or 79.2%) and 1,698 (or 72.8%) completed questionnaires in the second and third wave respectively. For our analysis we use questions from the first pre-electoral and the third post-electoral wave. The data will be weighted according to province, age, gender, education, occupation, and party preference to correct for possible sampling effects.



Social class is operationalized by looking at the professional situation of the respondents. We divide them into four categories: upper class (employers with at least six employees, free and liberal professions, management directors and executive officers), middle class (employees, farmers and employers with less than six employees), working class (skilled and non-skilled workers) and non-active people (a diverse category consisting of pensioners, unemployed, students, housewives and househusbands). The working class always functions as reference category in the statistical analyses.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Policy preferences

We will first investigate whether working class people adopt different views on political issues in comparison with people from other social classes. If this appears to be so, this could imply that their views and interests tend to be overlooked in a parliament composed almost exclusively with people from other social classes. We are fully aware that other parliamentarians than those belonging to the working class could substantially defend the interests of working class people in parliament, but when the difference in policy positions between classes appears to be large, this substantial representation could become problematic.

Several variance-analyses were conducted with policy issues as dependent variables, and the social class one belongs to as independent variable. If possible, a composite indicator was calculated. If not (because Cronbach alpha's were too low), the separate items are presented in the table.

Table 1: Variance analysis of political issues according to the social class one belongs to<sup>4</sup>

	Upper class	Middle class	Non-active	Working class
<b>Socio-economic issues<sup>5</sup></b>				
Trade unions should have more influence on important economic decisions (1-5)***	2,50***	3,11***	3,23***	3,57
The Post should be privatized (1-5) **	2,80**	2,51	2,41	2,45
The role of the government in the direction of	2,73*	2,68**	2,91	2,98

<sup>4</sup> An F test is conducted to estimate whether differences on this variable are significant. A T test is conducted to estimate whether the scores of the different class groups differs from the working class (as reference category)

<sup>5</sup> Cronbach alpha = 0,21. Therefore all variables are discussed separately.

the economy should decrease (1-5) **				
<b>Immigration issues (1-5)<sup>6</sup> ***</b>	3,02***	2,94***	2,80*	2,61
<b>Moral-ethical issues<sup>7</sup></b>				
A woman should have the right to choose abortion when she prefers this (1-5) (ns)	4,20	4,15	4,16	4,09
The use of cannabis should be severely prohibited (1-5) ***	3,55*	3,57*	4,15***	3,83
It is normal that gay and lesbian couples have the right to adopt children (1-5) ***	3,29	3,52	3,04**	3,37
<b>'Law and order' issues<sup>8</sup> (1-5) ***</b>	3,17***	3,29***	3,64	3,71

\*\*\* p < .001 ; \*\* p < .01 ; \* p < .05

As for the socio-economic dimension, working class people continue to take more leftist positions, but only when it concerns the role of trade unions. This is in line with other recent findings in a number of Western countries (Vander Waal et al., 2007). Regarding the role of trade unions, an average score of 3.57 (on a 5-point scale) for the working class demonstrate that they are favorable towards more involvement of the trade unions in economic decision-making. This score is also significantly different from all other classes at stake here. Concerning the role of the government in the economy and the issue of privatization, the picture is more blurred. Working class people are more reluctant towards privatization, but only the difference with the upper class appears to be statistically significant. As for the role of the government in the economy, working class people tend to be more in favor for a reduction of this role with a score of 2.98. This score is even significantly higher than the scores of the middle and upper classes. This is remarkable since working class people are in general thought to take rather leftist stances, including support for intervention of the government in the economy. Probably, working class people are less confident that the government will further their interests. The under-representation of working class people in political institutions could be an explanation here (see also below).

<sup>6</sup> Cronbach alpha = 0,73. A scale from 1 to 5 was constructed on the basis of these items "It is normal that foreigners who have resided legally in this country for 5 years are granted the right to vote on the local level" and "Immigration contributes to the welfare of a country" and the inverse scores on "Belgium should close its borders to asylum seekers." The higher the score, the more positive one is towards immigration.

<sup>7</sup> Cronbach alpha = 0, 45. Therefore all variables are discussed separately.

<sup>8</sup> Cronbach alpha = 0,51. A scale from 1 to 5 was constructed on the basis of these items "Discipline and effort should first and foremost be learned to children at school", "People breaking the law should be more severely punished", and "The death penalty should be reintroduced.". The higher the score, the more positive one is towards a strict 'law and order' approach.

In sum, working class people continue to support the role of trade unions in economic decision-making, while they are more reluctant concerning the role of the government.

For the issue of immigration, we were able to construct a composite scale: the opinions of the working class are clearly less positive towards immigration than those of people belonging to other social classes or people who are not active. This is also in line with other empirical results (Vander Waal et al., 2007) and is one of the explanations of the attractiveness of the extreme right among the working class (Kitschelt, 1995). Working class people are clearly more restrictive as concerns immigration than other social classes.

We now move to moral-ethical issues. Abortion does no longer appear to be an issue that divides social classes. They are all almost equally convinced that a woman should have the right to choose abortion when she prefers this (scores of above 4 on a 5-point scale). As for the use of cannabis and the right to adopt children for gay and lesbian couples, the main dividing line appears to be between the non-active and the active. The non-active, including pensioners, are in general more restrictive concerning these two topics. Only for cannabis, there is a difference, which is only slightly significant, between the working class and the other classes. Working class people tend to be slightly more restrictive towards cannabis than people from the middle and the upper class.

Finally, we have a look at the composite scale of 'law and order' issues. Working class people tend to be more in favor of a firm and strict approach compared to the other classes (score of 3.71 which significantly differs from the scores of other classes). The position of the non-active on this issue is, however, comparable to that of the working class.

To conclude, working class people take at least on some issues another position than people from other social classes. They have more in particular different positions about the role of trade unions and about immigration and 'law and order' issues. If a parliament is almost exclusively composed with non-working class people, these differences could provide problems in terms of the representation of these interests.

## 5.2 Trust and political efficacy

Next, we use three classic political concepts (political trust, internal efficacy and external efficacy) to estimate whether the under-representation of working class people causes trust problems in the relationship between these people and the institution in which they are under-represented.

Political trust is a general measure which refers to the perception of the way a political system functions. It is about the support from society towards political institutions (Easton, 1965 ; Hooghe et al., 2011), which is in principle independent from the current members of these political institutions. The sense of political efficacy, which can be defined as the feeling that the political action of an individual can have an effect on the political process, contains two components: internal and external efficacy (Craig, Niemi & Silver, 1990). Internal efficacy is about political self-confidence. It focuses on the citizens and their beliefs about their competences and capabilities to understand politics and to participate actively in it. External efficacy is about political impotence. It directs the attention towards the political institutions and measures to what extent they are perceived as responsive to citizen demands.

Table 2: Variance analysis of political trust and political efficacy according to the social class one belongs to

	Upper class	Middle class	Non-active	Working class
Political trust <sup>9</sup> (0-60) (ns)	30,48	29,62	30,35	29,64
Internal efficacy <sup>10</sup> (1-5) ***	3,00***	2,61*	2,56	2,49
External efficacy <sup>11</sup> (1-5) ***	3,23***	3,37***	3,63	3,72

<sup>9</sup> Cronbach alpha = 0,90. An additive scale from 0 to 60 was constructed on the basis of institutions that could be placed on a trust continuum from 0 to 10. These institutions are political parties, Flemish/Walloon government, Flemish/Walloon parliament, federal government, federal parliament and politicians in general. The higher the score, the more one has trust in political actors.

<sup>10</sup> Cronbach alpha = 0,68. A scale from 1 to 5 was constructed on the basis of items related to political self-confidence: “I consider myself as capable to participate in politics”, “I think I would perform as good as most politicians that are elected”, “I think I am better informed about politics and government than most people” and “I have a good knowledge of the most important issues in contemporary society”. The higher the score, the higher the level of political self-confidence.

<sup>11</sup> Cronbach alpha = 0,57. A scale from 1 to 5 was constructed on the basis of items related to political impotence: “Going to the polls does not make sense, parties do what they want, anyway” and “At election time, one party make more promises than the other, but in the end nothing will come of it”, and the inverse scores on “An ordinary citizens does really have influence on politics and on what the government is doing”. The higher the score, the higher the feeling of political powerlessness.

\*\*\*  $p < .001$  ; \*\*  $p < .01$  ; \*  $p < .05$

The descriptive under-representation of blue collar workers does not seem to impact on their general levels of political trust, as this is not significantly different from that of other social classes. The general political trust scores of all classes take an intermediate position on a scale from 0 to 60 (a score of 29.64 for the working class compared to 30.48 for the upper class).

The indicators of political efficacy, on the contrary, do exhibit significant differences between the working class and other social classes. Working class people are less convinced that they have the capabilities to participate actively in politics and they have less the feeling that political actors are responsive to their wishes (always compared to the middle and the upper class). Owing to the descriptive under-representation of workers in Parliament, there are not many role models for workers, which strengthen the idea that politics is not for them. Consequently, workers estimate that they cannot make a difference in politics. They also have the feeling that political actors are not responsive towards their demands, which relates to the previous section in which we stated that their policy positions differ from these of other social classes.

In sum, workers are less self-confident and feel more political powerless than people from other social classes, but this is not translated in lower levels of trust in political institutions.

### 5.3 Party preferences

Given the institutional features of the Belgian political system (multi-party system with compulsory voting), the most appropriate outlet for dissatisfaction with the political process is voting for parties that are neither part of the government nor established opposition parties. Since abstaining is not an option, populist parties tend to attract dissatisfied voters who feel politically powerless. In Belgium, the libertarian List Dedecker (LDD) and the two extreme right parties (Vlaams Belang on the Flemish side and FN on the French-speaking side) could be labeled as populist parties (Hooghe et al., 2011). Respondents of the Partirep survey were asked to give a score from 0 to 10 indicating the extent to which their points of view matched with those of the

political parties at stake.<sup>12</sup> We will analyse whether populist parties tend to be more popular among working class people, and whether social-democratic parties, whose main goal used to be voicing the interest of the working class, still counts adherents among workers.

Table 3: Variance analysis of degree of agreement with the points of view of political parties<sup>13</sup> (0-10 scale), according to social class

	Upper class	Middle class	Non-active	Working class
CD&V (0-10) ***	4,87	5,02**	5,46***	4,45
OpenVLD (0-10) ***	5,54***	5,12 *	4,79	4,66
Sp.a (0-10) (ns)	4,88	5,05	4,73	4,65
Vlaams Belang (0-10) ***	3,07**	2,85***	2,76***	3,95
N-VA (0-10) (ns)	4,74*	4,46	4,48*	4,10
Groen! (0-10) ***	4,19**	4,53***	3,84	3,45
LDD (0-10) ***	4,31	4,10**	3,42***	4,85
CDH (0-10) *	4,48	4,93	5,21*	4,64
MR (0-10) ***	5,90***	4,32	4,40	4,23
PS (0-10) ***	3,46***	4,91	5,15	5,04
FN (0-10) (ns)	0,75	0,74*	0,98	1,34
Ecolo (0-10) (ns)	5,45	5,12	4,58	4,88

\*\*\*  $p < .001$  ; \*\*  $p < .01$  ; \*  $p < .05$

The results show that blue collar workers in Flanders do not give a higher score to social-democratic parties compared to people from other social classes. For the Flemish Sp.a, the upper and the middle class even gives a higher average score, which does, however, not differ significantly from the score of the working class people. As for the French-speaking PS, there are still class differences, but only with the upper class.

<sup>12</sup> This indirect question about party preferences is thought to yield more reliable and complete answers than a direct question about actual voting behavior.

<sup>13</sup> Only evaluations of parties of the own region are taken into account. This means for instance that for Flemish parties only the evaluations of Flemish respondents are used. In this way, other considerations (such as appreciations of the viewpoints vis-à-vis the other region) are filtered out of the analysis.

The difference in working class appeal between these two social-democratic parties can be explained by differences in distributing material benefits and in keeping traditional socio-economic issues high on the political agenda (Coffé, 2008). The PS has done better on these two aspects, which allowed them to keep more working class voters on board.

It appears nevertheless that class differences are no longer a good predictor for explaining differences in appreciation of social-democratic parties.

There are significant differences between social classes in their appreciation of the liberal parties (OpenVLD and MR) who traditionally defend the interests of the self-employed and employers which belong to the middle and upper class. The same is true for the green party in Flanders (Groen!) who despite their left, but also often individualistic ideological orientation, tend to attract more people from middle and upper classes. The fact that this party is a new, non-established party (which could be attractive for dissatisfied voters) does not result in a higher appreciation rate. This seems however to be the case for the French-speaking green party Ecolo, for whom there are no class differences in their appreciation scores. Probably, their anti-establishment character, which is more outspoken than that of their Flemish counterparts (Hooghe et al, 2011), is able to eliminate the class bias based on ideological reasons.

There are also class differences in the extent to which people estimate that christian-democratic (CD&V and CDH) views correspond with their own views, although these differences are less outspoken and they refer mainly to the higher scores among the non-active, including many pensioners. The rather low scores among the working class could be attributed to the aversion politically under-represented blue collar workers tend to have toward established (government) parties.

This comes forward even stronger from the analysis of the scores of the extreme right parties (Vlaams Belang and FN). The scores given by working class respondents for Vlaams Belang differ significantly from the scores given by all other social classes. The differences in the (low) scores of FN are also considerable, but not statistically significant. The score among working class people is with 1.34 nevertheless much higher than the scores in other social classes. The same more or less applies when we take the libertarian populist party LDD into account: the score they obtain is much higher than the scores obtained among respondents from other social classes.

This is confirmed in Table 4 where we take the average score populist parties (LDD, FN and Vlaams Belang) obtain as an indicator. Here, the extent to which working class people estimate that their views correspond with the views of these parties differs significantly from people of other social classes. Dissatisfaction with their own political under-representation and with the perceived lack of responsiveness from the traditional parties seem to push workers into the direction of populist parties.

Table 4: Variance analysis of the degree of agreement with the points of view of three populist parties, according to social class

	Upper class	Middle class	Non-active	Working class
Populist parties: VB, LDD and FN (0-10) ***	2,41***	2,42***	2,09***	3,38

\*\*\*  $p < .001$  ; \*\*  $p < .01$  ; \*  $p < .05$

In sum, it appears that workers prefer populist parties more than other classes, while there are no class differences as concerns the appreciation of social-democratic parties, who nevertheless has traditional linkages with the working class. Other established parties tend to be slightly less liked by workers than by other social classes.

#### 5.4 Styles of representation

Another option to resolve dissatisfaction with how the representation process works can be found in a new style of representation and/or in reforming the representative system.

People in general differ in their opinion about how they like to be represented (Carman, 2006 ; Depauw & Van Haute, 2010). A consequence of the under-representation of the working class in Parliament could be that the way people want to be represented (representation styles) differs between social classes. We expect that working class people will give less leeway to elected representatives who almost exclusively come from the middle and upper classes. A similar relationship between descriptive underrepresentation and preference for a close relationship between representatives and voters was found earlier by Bengtsson & Wass (2010) concerning women.



In the Partirep survey, there were three questions about what an MP should do in case of conflict: one about a conflict between party views and own views, one about conflict between party views and voters' views and one about conflict between voters' views and the own views of the MP. We recoded these items into one variable expressing which actor's opinions should prevail in case of conflict: the opinions of the party, of voters or of the MP himself. Around 10% of the respondents gave inconsistent answers (putting each actor once at the first place).

Table 5: Frequency table: styles of representation and social class, chi square analysis

	Upper class	Middle class	Non-active	Working class
Inconsistent answers	5,7 %	10,0 %	17,2 %	12,7 %
Party representative	24,6 %	22,0 %	23,7 %	20,4 %
Trustee (own opinion)	29,7 %	24,7 %	15,2 %	20,4 %
Delegate (opinion of voters)	40,0 %	43,3 %	43,9 %	46,4 %

Pearson  $\chi^2 = 45,067$  \*\*\*

About half of the working class people (46 %) prefer an MP acting as a delegate, i.e. a representative who receives instructions from the voters how to defend their interests and how to vote on particular topics. In this view, the opinion of the voters prevails over the opinion of the party and of the MP themselves. The percentage of workers preferring party representatives or trustee representatives (in which respectively party's and MP's own opinions prevail) is with around 20 % much lower. A chi square analysis indicates that the preference for a style of representation differs from one social class to another. An earlier multivariate logistics regression analysis has, however, revealed that social class does not impact significantly on the style of representation one prefers (Depauw & Van Haute, 2011). Probably, the correlation between social class and other variables in the analysis (such as internal and external efficacy) could be an explanation for this lack of significance.

A second element related to the functioning of the representative system, is the opinion about the need of reforming this system. More in particular, we refer to reforms aimed at turning the

representative system into a system with a more direct democracy (Vetter, 2009). These reforms include amongst others the introduction of referenda and directly electing the prime minister. These reforms erode much of the power of parliament in which workers are not well represented. Given the descriptive under-representation of workers in parliament, it seems likely that they will be more in favor of reforms proposing elements of direct democracy.

Table 6: Variance analysis of the support for citizen democracy, according to social class

	Upper class	Middle class	Non-active	Working class
Support for citizen democracy <sup>14</sup> (1-4) **	2,75**	2,81*	2,88	2,90

\*\*\*  $p < .001$  ; \*\*  $p < .01$  ; \*  $p < .05$

Table 6 shows that working class people are in general more supportive for “citizen democracy” than people from other social classes. The score of 2,90 (on a 4-point scale) significantly differs from that of the upper and middle classes.

## 6. Conclusions

Working class people are (and have always been) underrepresented in Belgian parliament in descriptive terms. The lack of descriptive representation (being present in parliament) can have consequences on the substantive representation (the raising of their interests in parliament) and on levels of trust in representative democracy. If opinions and points of interest clearly differ between social groups, then opinions of the underrepresented social groups tend to be overlooked in parliament. We have first looked at the opinions of working class on a number of relevant political issues. Our results show that working class people take at least on some issues another position than people from other social classes. They have more in particular different positions about the role of trade unions and about immigration and ‘law and order’ issues. If a parliament

<sup>14</sup> Cronbach alpha = 0,55. A scale from 1 to 4 was constructed on the basis of these items, on which respondents could indicate whether they are desirable: “To organize more referenda”, “The position on the candidate list should be determined by open primaries in which all party members can participate”, “To give more decision-making power to experts and independent agencies”, “Interest groups in society should become more closely involved in political decision-making” and “Electing directly the Flemish/Walloon prime minister”. The higher the score, the higher the support for citizen democracy.

is almost exclusively composed of non-working class people, these differences could provide problems in terms of substantive representation.

Descriptive representation is also symbolically important. It has the potential to increase political trust and a sense of involvement among social groups, but the absence of it can lead to a decrease. It appears from our results that workers are less politically self-confident (internal efficacy) and feel more political powerless (external efficacy) than people from other social classes, but this is not translated into lower levels of trust in political institutions. Another expression of dissatisfaction with descriptive underrepresentation is voting for anti-establishment parties. It appears from our results that working class people tend to have more appreciation for populist parties than people from other social classes.

As for possible remedies to overcome the problem of underrepresentation, workers seem to prefer means to circumvent the traditional mode of representation in which representatives have much freedom to interpret the wishes of the represented. Our results show that working class people tend to prefer more a 'delegate' style of representation, in which representatives are more bound by orders received by their voters and that they tend to prefer measures introducing elements of direct democracy.

In sum, working class people are under-represented in parliament and they have other opinions on some political issues. This combination could cause problems for the substantive representation and for the functioning of the representative democracy in general. There are indications that there might indeed be a problem: working class people feel less politically self-confident and more politically powerless, they exhibit a higher appreciation for populist parties, they tend to prefer more binding instructions to representatives and they are more favourable to the introduction of elements of direct democracy.

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